NINEVEH AND SODOM JUXTAPOSED:
CONTRASTS AND PARALLELS

ABRAHAM EPHROS

In their behavior, the inhabitants of the pagan cities Sodom and Nineveh shared a common bent for wickedness and violence.[1] Nevertheless, the latter suffered no punishment whatsoever, whereas the former was totally destroyed.

In the case of Sodom, God is determined to apply the full measure of His attribute of strict justice [מידת הדין] in apparent disregard of the resulting unjust punishment inflicted upon innocents, few as they may be, along with the guilty. Man, represented by Abraham, confronts the Master of the Universe with the immortal words: *'. . . shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?'* (Gen. 18:25), and God relents at least to the extent of forgoing the destruction if there are 10 righteous men in Sodom.

However, in the Nineveh narrative, man, in the guise of the Prophet Jonah, opposes a seemingly overly generous application of the Lord's attribute of mercy [מידת הרחמים]. The prophet, unlike Father Abraham, does not challenge the Lord directly; instead, he makes an a priori doomed attempt to flee rather than carry out the Divinely decreed mission of mercy. But God persists.

Thus, the contrasting stories of Sodom and Nineveh may seem to be unrelated. Nevertheless, supposedly, such biblical texts may be connected by a homiletic device in which texts contain very similar (if not identical) words or expressions. This is done in order to reveal subtly hidden messages lurking beneath the surface.

Some instances of shared words and expressions (verbal parallelisms) may be found in the texts on Sodom and Nineveh. These are presented in a table of comparison and then analyzed to determine whether they may be merely coincidental or perhaps bona fide verbal parallelisms indicating a conscious effort by the author of the Book of Jonah to connect his text to the Sodom story, and if so, why.[2]

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NINEVEH -- *for their **wickedness*** [רָעָתָם] *is come up before Me* (Jon. 1:2).

SODOM -- *now the men of Sodom were **wicked** and sinners* [רָעִים וְחַטָּאִים] *against the Lord exceedingly* (Gen. 13:13).

NINEVEH -- *and put on sackcloth **from the greatest of them even to the least of them*** [מִגְּדוֹלָם וְעַד-קְטַנָּם] (Jon. 3:5).

SODOM -- *and they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness **both small and great*** [מִקָּטוֹן וְעַד גָּדוֹל] (Gen. 19:11).

NINEVEH -- *yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be **overthrown*** [נֶהְפָּכֶת] (Jon. 3:4).
SODOM -- *and He **overthrew** those cities* [וַיַּהֲפֹךְ] (Gen. 9:25).

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

A. רָעָתָם VERSUS רָעִים [WICKEDNESS VS. WICKED]

The evil doings of Nineveh and Sodom are described by words stemming from the same root "רעה,"although other terms were available, such as "רשעה" (Mal. 3:19), "עמל", "אָוֶן" (Ps. 55:11), and "עָוֶל" (Deut. 25:16). Furthermore, the use of the same root here is quite ironic since the sins of the Ninevites are described as emanating from simple-minded naïveté (Jon. 4:11), while those of the Sodomites reflect conscious willfulness. Such irony is a characteristic of verbal parallelisms.[3]

B. מִגְּדוֹלָם וְעַד-קְטַנָּם VERSUS מִקָּטוֹן וְעַד גָּדוֹל [*FROM THE GREATEST OF THEM EVEN TO THE LEAST OF THEM* VERSUS *BOTH SMALL AND GREAT*]

So common in the Bible is this expression[4] that its use in both narratives may indeed be coincidental. On the other hand, the evident irony may indicate a possible verbal parallelism as in "A" above. In this case, the willful wickedness of the men of Sodom is ironically juxtaposed to the sincere repentance of the Ninevites using almost identical expressions. Moreover, the irony is compounded
by the youngest Sodomites being already sexually depraved and the oldest still violent. In contrast, the people of Nineveh, both young and old, are doing תְּשׁוּבָה [repentance] and even their cattle participate in the fasting.

C. נֶהְפָּכֶת VERSUS וַיַּהֲפֹךְ [*OVERTHROWN* VERSUS *OVERTHREW*]

Several other roots are commonly employed in the Bible to generate expressions for destruction.[5] The author of the Book of Jonah chose the less usual "הפך" which appears for the first time in the Bible in the Sodom narrative.[6] This archetypal usage specifically describing the annihilation of a city appears only seven times, in four of which Sodom is explicitly or implicitly mentioned.[7] The Sodom text in Genesis 19:24-25 describes the city's destruction in vividly graphic detail simulating a volcanic eruption:

> …*brimstone and fire . . . from heaven*: A statement reminiscent of the contamination of the atmosphere by volcanic ash.
>
> *He overthrew* [וירהפוך] *those cities*: Here "overturned" is preferred by the writer as an apt word to describe a city previously atop the earth being buried underneath.
>
> *. . . and all the inhabitants of the cities and all that which grew upon the ground*: A description of the annihilation of all life with no escape possible, unless forewarned and under Divine protection (as in the case of Lot and his two daughters).

Is it any wonder that the repentance of Nineveh was swift and spontaneous, totally sincere and complete?

CONCLUSION

In "A" and "B" the presence of bona fide verbal parallelisms may be inferred by the element of irony. In "C," however, it is the commonality of a relatively unusual root word that can lend credence to the assumption of an intentional connection.

What might have motivated the author of Jonah to hint (if indeed he did) at a connection between the two subjects? Perhaps a veiled warning is directed to those who, after reading the Book of Jonah, might presume on God's apparently unlimited capacity for mercy. Such readers might not realize that the mercy granted could be contingent on a special circumstance; to wit, the naïve innocence attributed to the people of Nineveh. Therefore, a diametrically opposite special circumstance, the willful and unrepentant evil of the Sodomites, could very well generate a diametrically opposite response in the

form of a ruthlessly stern exercise of the Almighty's capacity for merciless retribution.

EPILOGUE

Both Sodom and Nineveh were pagan cities and thus equal in the eyes of the Lord the universal God. Consequently, the juxtaposition of these two cities stands by itself without any reference to the people of Israel, God's "treasured" people [עַם סְגוּלָה]; **the two wicked cities were judged on their behavior alone.**

The punishment meted out to Sodom, ruthless as it seems to be, may reasonably be justified by the vicious severity of its wickedness and the absence of any remaining innocents after the Divinely organized flight of Lot, his wife and two daughters (19:15).

In contrast, the absolution of the Ninevites without even a token punishment inflicted[8] appears to justify Jonah's described opposition to God's stance. As mentioned above, the final verse in Jonah (4:11) which states that the inhabitants of Nineveh have sinned unwittingly [בשגגה], may be the Lord's answer to the prophet's complaint, considering that their repentance has been proven to be sincere through acts of entreaty, penitence, and above all, total reform.

NOTES

1. In general terms, Sodom is accused of wickedness (Gen. 13:13). In detail, its sins are specified to be inhospitality (by implication) and sexual depravity (19:5), and physical violence (19:9). Similarly, Nineveh is described to be wicked and violent (Jon. 1:2, 3:8).

2. English translations of quoted texts are from the Hertz Humash, 2nd Edition, 1963.

3. This case contains yet another irony, implied by the entire phrase describing the moral depravity of Nineveh '*for their wickedness is come up before Me*.' A contrasting phrase appears in Genesis 18:21: *'I will go down now and see whether the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great . . . .'* This may indicate the possibility of another connecting link between the two stories. The typical ironic twist of a verbal parallelism is manifest; so severe and blatant are the transgressions of Nineveh that the need for the Almighty to "go down" to investigate as in the case of Sodom is obviated. Nevertheless, it is Sodom that is annihilated, while Nineveh apparently emerges unscathed. Although this irony is accomplished through contrasting rather than parallel expressions, may it not be considered to be yet another connecting link between these two stories?

4. I Samuel 5:9, 30:2, 19; II Kings 23:2, 25:26; Jeremiah 8:10, 42:1, 42:8, 44:12; Esther 1:5,20; II Chronicles 34:30.

5. אַבֵּד, הַאֲבֵד, אָבַד; כלה, כַּלֵּה; הַכָּרֵת, הַכְרֵת; ההרס, הַרֹס; הַחֲרֵב,חָרֹב; שמד, הַשְׁמֵד and שחת, הַשְׁחֵת.

6. Although this narrative spanning sections Genesis 18-19 שחת ,השחת in addition to הפך, the latter is used exclusively to depict the destructive process as it is occurring.
7. Deuteronomy 29:22*; II Samuel 10:3; II Kings 21:13; Jeremiah 20:16*; Amos 4:11*; Jonah 3:4;Lamentations 4:6*. (Passages with an asterisk have references to Sodom.)
8. Commenting on Exodus 34:7, J.H. Hertz states: "Pardon is not the remission of the penalty, but the forgiveness of the guilt . . . . "

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QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Why does Adam respond to God's interrogation (Gen. 3:11) by saying: "The woman that You gave me..."(3:12)? After all, God knows who she is and she is the only woman there!

2. Abraham is often held up as the model Hebrew. Trace the virtues and values in *Parshat Lech Lecha* that led to this idealization of the first patriarch.

3. Find and explain the discrepancy between what Sarah says and how God reports her words to Abraham (Gen. 18:12f.).

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